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MONTANA COMMITTEE FOR THE
HUMANITIES
NEWSLETTER

Montanans' Advice Wanted

Dear Friends of the Humanities,

The year 1982 marks the Tenth Anniversary of the Montana Committee for the Humanities as one of the state-based programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities. While all of us who are affiliated with the Montana Committee for the Humanities look back with a great deal of pride to the impressive number of high quality public programs we have sponsored in the humanities, we also look ahead to our anniversary year as a new challenge which will undoubtedly put some difficult decisions before us. For a variety of reasons, most of them budgetary in nature, we are entering a critical period of evaluation, planning and change. *I invite you all to share with us your insights, wisdom, and concrete suggestions* during these next several months as we discuss and plan for the activities and kinds of programs which we will encourage and support in the future.

As most of you know, the "humanities" are finally in the news. Some of that news is even good news. After a period of several years during which enrollments declined and the humanities were often viewed as impractical since they did not necessarily lead to immediate high-paying jobs, there appears to be a widespread renewal of interest in the various humanities disciplines in our schools and in our society in general. Employers of all kinds have started to demand of their new employees that they possess not only certain practical skills, but that they be educated "liberally" as well. Those of us who teach in the various humanities disciplines have always been convinced that our students, to be educated and well-informed members of our society, had to have knowledge of history, literature, philosophy, foreign languages and other parts of our increasingly complex and intertwined world, and had to be able to think critically, discuss and reach their own informed conclusions about crucial social and political issues. Others, many of you included, have voiced the same conviction. The Rockefeller Commission, in its recent report titled The Humanities in American Life, has given public support to these convictions and has issued a challenge to all of us, educators and general public alike, to promote both the study and discussion of the traditional humanities disciplines and to encourage public inquiry and dialogue on critical, contemporary issues in a humanistic context. We can all hope that this apparent renewed interest continues to grow, and we should all do our part to see that it does.

Yet, the news about the "humanities" is not all good news. The humanities and humanists have come under attack recently in some parts of the country by certain groups and individuals who willfully misunderstand our concerns and activities, choosing to refer to us as "secular humanists" who are "godless" and a threat to traditional morality and values. Although, as a group, we do not espouse any specific morality, other than, perhaps, the inherent dignity of human beings and tolerance toward legitimate differences in thought and behavior, there is certainly nothing "immoral" or "godless" about what we do. The humanities disciplines focus on the study of human beings in their relationship to God, to nature and to other human beings, both in the historical and contemporary context. How the study and discussion of history, Shakespeare, Native American traditions or Plato can be termed "godless" remains a mystery to most of us. If, however, open discussion and critical inquiry into serious social and political issues pose a threat to some peoples' values, then so be it. For it is such discussion and inquiry to which we are committed.

Also on the negative side of this new media interest in the humanities is the fact that much of this news revolves around budget cuts. As most of you already know, the Reagan Administration appears committed to reducing the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities (along with that of the National Endowment for the Arts) considerably. The exact amount of those cuts and their impact has not yet been determined, but it is obvious that federal support for the Arts and Humanities (including support for museums and libraries of all kinds, for performing arts groups, for basic research in the arts and humanities, and for state-based programs such as the Montana Committee for the Humanities) will decrease substantially.

Consequently, as the Montana Committee for the Humanities looks ahead to its Tenth Anniversary, we find ourselves confronted by new tasks and new challenges. In many ways, of course, these past ten years have been years of experimentation, of trial and error, as the Committee has developed and searched continually for the best ways to support and encourage public programs in the humanities across the state of Montana. During the first several years, we worked under a congressional mandate which required that all programs which we sponsored focus on issues of public policy. Since 1976, however, under new congessional legislation, we have not been limited by that requirement, and many new kinds of programs have been possible. In the past three or four years, roughly one-half of all MCH-sponsored programs related directly to public policy questions, and roughly one-half related to more traditional humanities disciplines.

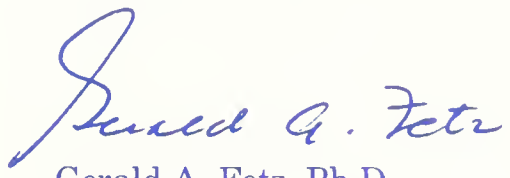
Those of us who have been privileged to serve on the Committee since 1976 have been pleased with the latitude which the 1976 legislation gave us to support a greater variety of programs. We are quite proud, for instance, of two new grant categories we initiated and which have served as models for many other states: the Oral History Category and the Category for Museums, Libraries and Historical Societies. In November, 1980, we also sponsored a conference entitled "Work in the '80's: Economic Development and the Quality of Life in Montana," which we hoped would lead to further public programs that focus on work and labor in our state as we enter a period of growth and change.

Applications for public programs which would do just that have begun to arrive in our office. We are convinced that such programs will help us all, personally and as communities, reflect creatively on those parts of our lives which we term "work" and help us plan and make decisions about ourselves and our state in an informed and reflective manner rather than have such critical plans and decisions thrust upon us. The recent shutdowns in Anaconda and Kellogg, Idaho, are only two prime examples of why such discussions are necessary.

For the most part, however, the high points and successes during these past ten years have resulted from your efforts, the hundreds of individuals and scores of organizations, both large and small, who have conceived, organized and presented excellent humanities programs in all parts of our large state.

As we face the challenge of maintaining and even improving the activities and programs we sponsor with fewer dollars, we sincerely ask for your help and guidance in setting priorities. It is clear to us that we will not be able to do everything we have tried to do in the past. We will have to focus our efforts in order to live within the budget we receive and we will have to do so with a smaller staff. *Decisions will soon have to be made as to whether we should continue with our special grant categories, whether we can afford to fund media projects, or as many of them, whether we should fund programs with similar topics, even though these programs may take place in different parts of the state, whether we should require cash-match contributions for certain kinds of programs, etc.* I certainly do not believe in this case that less is better, nor do I believe that we have wasted any money in the past, but this challenge of doing better with less clearly must be met. We will continue to do our best to provide maximum support for quality humanities programs in Montana, but I ask your indulgence as we reassess our programs. More importantly, however, I ask for your advice. Please feel free to make your views known to me, to any other MCH member, or to our Executive Director, Margaret Kingsland.

Sincerely, for the Humanities and for Montana,



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